

The Pop Life

By Neil Strauss
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At the Ball

New music in 1995 got accepted by pop culture at a faster rate than ever. Dance music trends developed every few months, formerly obscure world-music artists collaborated with pop stars, and alternative rock solidified its position as the new Top 40. Though it may seem hard enough to keep up with the new bands at the top of the pop charts, not every group of note makes it on the radio or into major record chains. Listed here are 10 of the most notable releases that almost got away last year because they didn't have the distribution or promotion resources of a major label or an American label.

In addition to being available by mail or telephone, many of these records can be found or ordered at the record stores Adult Crash (66 Avenue A, East Village), Downtown Music Gallery (211 East Fifth Street, East Village) or Kim's Underground (144 Bleecker Street, West Village).

CAT POWER "Dear Sir" (Runt, Viale E. Duse 16A, Florence, Italy 50137): Chan Marshall sings with pent-up power on this record (featuring Steve Shelley of Sonic Youth on drums), an alternative-rock equivalent of the blues with songs wailed from the point of view of the psychotic, the distressed and the just plain confused.

COYLE AND SHARPE "On the Loose" (213CD, P.O. Box 1910, Los Angeles, Calif. 90078): In the early 1960's, before cynicism was commonplace, the comedy duo of James P. Coyle and Mal Sharpe wandered the streets with a briefcase concealing a tape recorder, stopping pedestrians to see if they could persuade them to rob a bank or to ask them if they would have coins surgically implanted in their heads if it meant the money would be doubled. The responses collected here are as hilarious as they are illuminating.

EARTHLING "Radar" (Cooltempo, 131-133 Holland Park Avenue, London, England W11 4UT): This English duo takes a high-minded approach to trip-hop, refusing to let the laid-back beats and shifting sound collages of its music (with Geoff Barrow of Portishead performing on some tracks) take precedence over its sci-fi raps, which rhyme "Nat King Cole" with "fishbowl" and "Fidel Castro" with "Afro."

MONEY MARK "Mark's Keyboard Repair" (Mo Wax, 167 Caledonian Road, London, England N1 0SL): Mark Ramos-Nishita, the keyboardist for the Beastie Boys, offers 21 excellent and idiosyncratic song scraps of low-fidelity funk that play like a soundtrack to a 1970's television police drama. Also notable on the Mo Wax label is "Meiso," by DJ Krush of Japan, a smartly composed montage of beats and scratches with guest raps by Guru, C. L. Smooth and the Roots.

OVAL "94diskont" (Mille Plateaux, 10 Werft, Frankfurt, Germany 60327): This German group has learned how to make music out of technology's shortcomings, taking compact disks and scratching them, pressing them against the CD player's laser and otherwise mutilating them to come up with a surprisingly soothing sound environment.

SALAMAT AND MUSICIANS OF THE NILE "Salam Delta" (Piranha, available from Stern's, 598 Broadway, New York 10012): This is an excellent and accessible collaboration between two Egyptian bands, with female vocals, high-flying brass and whirring strings gathering for a polyrhythmic party. A more serious Egyptian recording also worth hunting down is Mohammed Mounir's new album of contemporary Nubian folk-pop, "Momkin" (CD Saudi Arabia), available from Rashid Sales, 191 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn 11201.

ELLIOTT SMITH "Elliott Smith" (Kill Rock Stars, 120 N.E. State No. 418, Olympia, Wash., 98501): In gently strummed, quietly sung songs, Mr. Smith, of Portland, Ore., sorts through problems of love and friendship. Like an imperfect guardian angel, he hovers tentatively on the edge of other people's lives, telling them, in "Alphabet Town," "She probably won't say you're wrong, but you're already wrong."

T POWER "The Self Evident Truth of an Intuitive Mind" (Sour, 8 Strutton Ground, London, England SW1P 2HP England): The sounds on this lush, innovative CD are so well-chosen, sequenced and placed by T Power's mastermind, Marc Royal, that in addition to fusing the electronic dance-music styles of the moment -- intelligent techno, jungle, ambient -- he manages to transcend them.

TOKYO SKA PARADISE ORCHESTRA "Grand Prix" (Epic/Sony Japan): This big band brings together salsa, jazz, punk, ska and soul for a fun, horn-infused album sung in Japanese and English.

WESTON "Splitsville" (Gern Blandsten, P.O. Box 356, River Edge, N.J. 07661): Like a 1980's pop-rock band in hyper-drive (and with a better sense of humor), the punk band Weston mixes old singles and new songs on its second album.

David Rosenboom

David Rosenboom is to perform at Merkin Concert Hall at 8 tonight (129 West 67th Street, Manhattan) with an instrument he has been playing since the 1970's: the human brain. On his albums "Brainwave Music" and "Being Invisible," both two decades old, Mr. Rosenboom began using the brain waves of performers to control electronic instruments in real time. He soon moved on to other research, becoming dean of the School of Music at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia and, most recently, recording an album, "Two Lines" (Lovely Music), with the jazz composer Anthony Braxton.

Technological innovations and a renewal of interest in the field have allowed Mr. Rosenboom to return to his work with brain waves. Tonight he will be performing excerpts from "On Being Invisible II (Hypatia Speaks to Jefferson in a Dream)," a multimedia piece (with a narration by Robert Ashley) that Mr. Rosenboom refers to as a musical system, not a composition.

"The role of brain waves in the piece is to determine how the music becomes structured from an unstructured beginning," he said. "The music will be going along and an important event will happen, and if the brain wave people are paying attention to it and the response is strong, that will cause the material to be captured and stored. It then becomes available for me to call back, to work with and to transform."

"What we take away from a concert is often not what was played, but a musical experience that was organized and synthesized by our memories," he added. "Active listening is a lot like composing."

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